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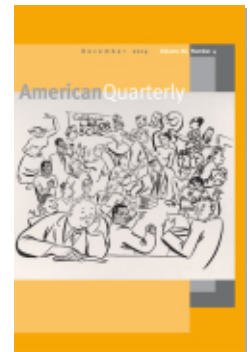
## **Locating the Mississippi: Landscape, Nature, and National Territoriality at the Mississippi Headwaters**

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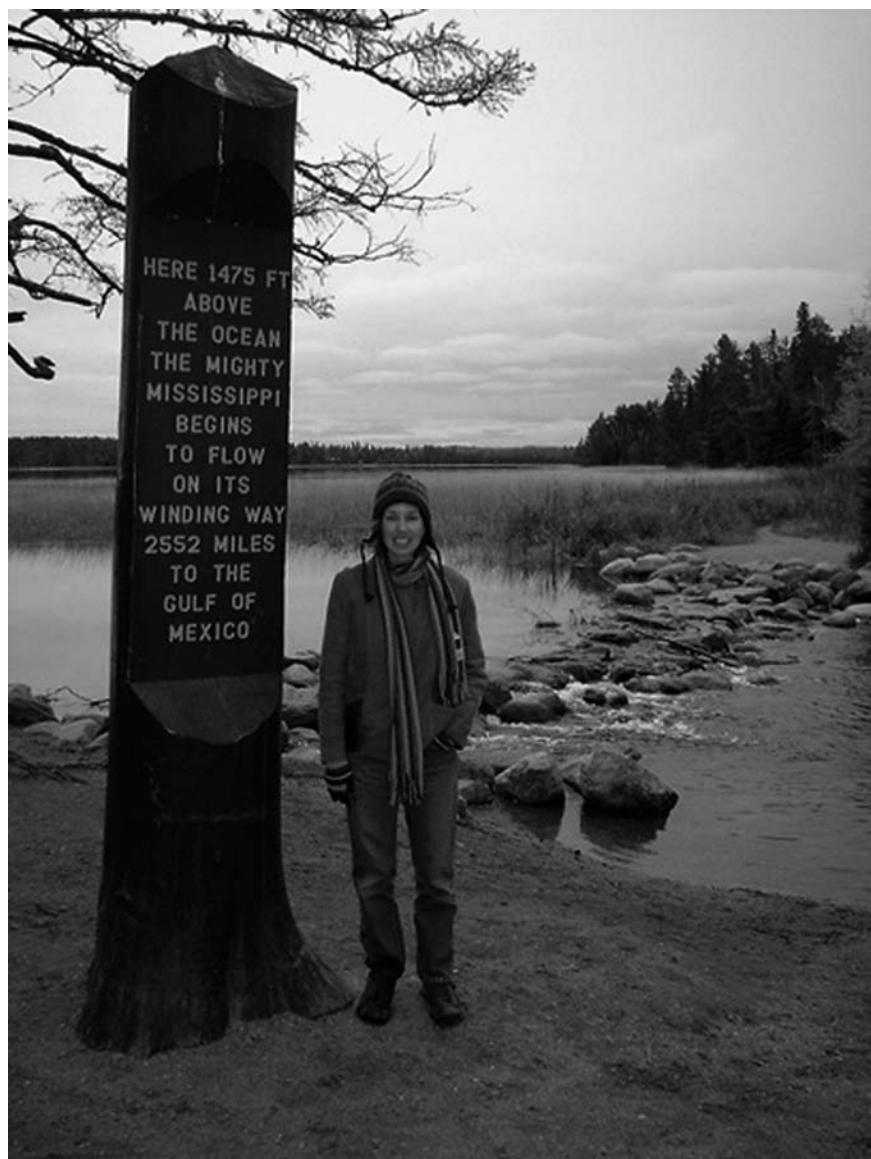
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# Locating the Mississippi: Landscape, Nature, and National Territoriality at the Mississippi Headwaters

Rich Heyman

In 1891 the State of Minnesota created its first state park at Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota to formally recognize the source of the Mississippi River.<sup>1</sup> The following year, Congress passed a law granting federal lands in the area to Minnesota to help preserve the site;<sup>2</sup> according to the 1897 *Legislative Manual of the State of Minnesota*, “the object of the reservation is to maintain intact, forever, a limited quantity of the domain of this commonwealth, seven miles long and five in width, in a state of nature.”<sup>3</sup> This legislative and congressional action was the direct result of the scientific work of Jacob V. Brower, who had been charged by the Minnesota Historical Society (a quasi-governmental entity that houses the official state archives) to make “a careful and scientific survey of Lake Itasca and its surroundings, with the view of determining by a thorough examination of the spot and of all its physical features, under all circumstances, what is the true and actual source of the Mississippi River.”<sup>4</sup> Brower’s report, delivered in February of 1890, settled the question of the river’s source, which had been cast into confusion by competing claims since the initial “discovery” and naming of Lake Itasca in 1832. Brower was subsequently appointed first superintendent of the park, and Lake Itasca has since been known as the “Headwaters of the Mississippi.” Approximately half a million people visit the thirty-two-thousand-acre park each year,<sup>5</sup> primarily to see the spot where the Mississippi River flows out of the northern end of the lake, cascading over a line of rocks and forming a stream channel about thirty feet wide. Many visitors get their pictures taken next to a sign reading “Here 1475 ft above the ocean the mighty Mississippi begins to flow on its winding way 2552 miles to the Gulf of Mexico” or while crossing the stream along the rocks that form the boundary between Lake Itasca and the river (fig. 1).

What most visitors don’t realize when they wade across the stream exiting Lake Itasca is that they are actually walking along a concrete dam constructed in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), an employment



project of Roosevelt's economic recovery efforts. The CCC spent more than two years constructing an accessible and legible tourist landscape to mark the origin of the Mississippi River. Besides building the dam itself, the CCC dug the current river channel and "renaturalized" the banks for nearly half a mile to confine the stream to "a uniform width," which involved importing some forty thousand cubic yards of fill and topsoil, and planting thousands of trees and shrubs (figs. 2, 3).<sup>6</sup> R. C. Smith, superintendent of the CCC project, explains that the main objective of the project was to "restore this area to the state in which it properly should be, that of a scenic historically interesting spot to be preserved in its [*sic*] natural form."<sup>7</sup>

The joint action by the State of Minnesota and the Federal Government to designate and "preserve" "in a state of nature" the headwaters of the Mississippi suggests the link between this site and the importance of the Mississippi River in the national imagination, as a kind of natural symbol of the nation. For the State of Minnesota, the headwaters became an important symbol of national belonging, embodying a *natural* connection to the rest of the nation through

**Figure 1.**

The Headwaters of the Mississippi.  
Photograph by the author.

the physical continuity of the river as a taken-for-granted feature of the landscape. This sentiment of national connection through nature is succinctly expressed in the recent book published by National Geographic to commemorate the

bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition by popular historians Stephen Ambrose and Douglas Brinkley: in his introduction, Ambrose claims that "it is the river that draws us together as a nation."<sup>8</sup>

Yet, the Mississippi River is more than a mere symbol: the yoking together of nature and nation—as Ambrose does so casually—was an important part of the process of constructing national territory. The sentiment expressed by Ambrose depends upon the existence of the Mississippi River as a unified, stable, and ahistorical object of national knowledge originating in Lake Itasca and flowing unbroken to the Gulf of Mexico. It is the construction of this object that I investigate in this paper, specifically the role played in that construction by the establishment of the "headwaters of the Mississippi" at Lake Itasca, both through the explorations that determined the "source" of the river and the creation of a tourist landscape at Itasca State Park. I argue that expeditions to map the river by Spanish, French, British, and American explorers, rather than representing the "discovery" or "scientific" determining of a preexisting natural object, constitute the social construction of the river through repeated attempts to fix the river within European ways of knowing and make it intel-



ITASCA STATE PARK.SP.#.1.LAKE ITASCA MINNESOTA,MAY 11 1934.  
(PROJECT.#.50.)  
THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER AS IT LEAVES LAKE ITASCA,  
THE EARTHEN DYKE AND TEMPORARY OUTLET.

**Figure 2.**  
Picture of the CCC project. From the Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1953, Record Group 79, Box 72; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.



PHOTO #62  
PROJECT # 48 JOB # 4  
Filling banks of Mississippi River, vicinity Beaver Dam.

**Figure 3.**  
Picture of the CCC project. From the Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1953, Record Group 79, Box 73; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

ligible in ways that made both the river and knowledge of it autonomous from indigenous forms of knowledge, to make it *appear* as a wholly “natural” object. The exploration of the Mississippi, the establishment of a stable source of the river, and the creation and maintenance of the headwaters landscape are all part of the geographic project of making the territory of the nation appear as a collection of stable, timeless, and self-evident natural objects, a *cultural* process that accompanied the violent appropriation of indigenous land through which national territory was acquired. The Mississippi River is itself an artifact of this colonial history, a “natural” object that exists *because of*, not despite, that history, and one that is restaged and made available for contemporary uses by the tourist landscape at Lake Itasca. The scripting of the landscape at Itasca State Park performs an important role in maintaining the very objectivity of the Mississippi River as a central component of national territoriality.

This article contributes to the ongoing American studies project of exploring the cultural processes of U.S. expansion and imperialism,<sup>9</sup> as well as the more recent interest in geography and place making.<sup>10</sup> These two projects are related, as Mary Dudziak and Leti Volpp argue: “Once we view the United States in a global context, once territory—formerly the implicit boundary around American studies—is decentered, it becomes important to ask what the frame is around ‘American’ studies, and to ask how, in a global context, U.S. borders and identities are constructed.”<sup>11</sup> The special issue of *American Quarterly* they edited sheds much light on the law’s role in constituting U.S. borders; however, in focusing on the *border*—the edge—they leave unexamined processes by which *territory* itself—the space defined by that edge—is constituted as a national object. On the other hand, this study of the scientific production of nature (and its restaging) at the Mississippi headwaters, from the perspective of recent work in cultural geography, makes clear some of the mechanisms through which the national imaginings of geography were territorialized in the landscape and made available to an imagined national community. Because of the symbolic importance of the Mississippi River, its social construction as a scientifically known “natural” object played a key role in constituting national territory, an imperialist project that simultaneously depended on and helped erase indigenous conceptions of and claims on the land; the landscape at Itasca State Park sustains this process and keeps it alive today.

## National Landscape, Nature, and Science

Much of the scholarship on landscapes that narrate or script the nation looks at how historical sites or memorials help produce nationalist collective memory.<sup>12</sup>

Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson, Nuala Johnson, for example, argues that the process of memorialization by which memories are made material in the landscape is “connected with a style of politics associated with the rise of the national state. The development of extra-local memories is intrinsic to the mobilization of an ‘imagined community’ of nationhood.”<sup>13</sup> By creating interpretations and representations of the past, historic sites and memorials help formulate and reify notions of national identity that are key to creating the kind of collective imagined connections necessary for nationhood. However, as much of the literature shows, these notions are never unproblematic: instead, they are the locus of often intense contestation and struggle. Historic sites and memorials are always reinterpreted by visitors, and meaning is always open-ended. By contrast, the landscape at Lake Itasca performs its nationalizing work not by memorializing or narrating the nation: it is neither a national memorial nor the site of an event of national significance, such as a battlefield. Rather, it is linked to the process of nationalism through its presentation of nature. Work on landscape and nature tends to focus on what these landscapes say about the relationship between humans and the nonhuman,<sup>14</sup> but at Lake Itasca, the landscape performs the important national work of “restaging” the scientific production of nature, in this case the production of the Mississippi River. The historical narrative scripted at the site is linked to nationalism not by the *historical* claims it is making, but through the claims it is making about the *ahistorical* nature of the river as an object.

The physical construction of the “natural” source of the river in the 1930s calls our attention to the way in which the ahistoricity of the river and the river itself are social constructions. But such social construction does not begin with the literal manipulation of the landscape in the 1930s; rather, the work of the CCC is merely the logical extension of a process that dates back to the earliest attempts to bring the river into European ways of knowing. The techniques of various Europeans and Euro-Americans to explore, locate, map, chart, catalog—in short, to *know*—the river can be thought of collectively as the activities of an emerging geographical science, a set of procedures for producing reliable and accurate knowledge of the natural world. However, many recent scholars have begun looking at the ways that such scientific practices themselves constitute the very objects they purport to merely describe.<sup>15</sup> This work holds that “nature” (or “social nature,” as it is often called) should not be viewed as a pre-given and stable category but as socially constructed in the sense that “nature” is made intelligible to us through various practices and discourses, among the most important of which are scientific ones. Meaning is fixed in these objects through specific practices, including science; and it is



through the very process of fixing meaning that these objects gain their shapes and boundedness. Certainly, water flows across land in certain channels regardless of whether people label it or not; however, the process of defining and naming a certain channel as *this* river—and thereby demarcating a supposed “natural object” with such-and-such qualities and boundaries—is a wholly social practice bound up with cultural and political processes.<sup>16</sup>

A study of the landscape at the Mississippi headwaters in Lake Itasca State Park shows how scientific territorializations are not completed acts of the past but are ongoing processes that need to be continually restaged. In other words, the stability of the Mississippi River as a spatial object linked to the very territory of the nation is never finally fixed; the process is never brought to final closure. Instead, it depends on the continuing work of landscape at places such as Lake Itasca.

### The Headwaters Site

When R. C. Smith, superintendent of the CCC project, referred to such a massive reordering of the landscape at the outlet of the lake as the preservation of the river’s “natural form,”<sup>17</sup> he was following the lead of Earl Lang, Itasca State Park chief, who in 1933 first suggested the headwaters project. In a “Proposed Work Plan for the Unemployed” he wrote,

At this time I am sorry to say that the established source of our great river is a swampy, muddy and dirty sight. . . . This is, indeed, a sight that is not becoming to such a great river. My idea is to make a natural dam or flow at this point and have the water running or rippling over the sand to really make a start or beginning or beginning [*sic*] of our Mississippi. We have about a quarter of a mile where this swampy sluggish condition exists. . . . I can say our river can be built up to a point of beauty and also have the running effect of water that will really make it the Source of the Father of Waters.<sup>18</sup>

Both Smith and Lang imagine that a “great river” needs a definitive starting point commensurate with its greatness, a site both “natural” and picturesque, one that clearly displays a well-defined stream that visitors can imagine extending all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, linking, through the existence of a “natural” object, this spot to various places along the river all the way to New Orleans. And by writing “our river” Lang is implicitly making this a *national* project, as indeed the CCC itself was a program for national economic recovery run by the federal government.<sup>19</sup> The unreconstructed outlet of Lake Itasca, with its “swampy sluggish condition” and undefined river channel, could not adequately perform the kind of landscape work envisioned by Lang and the CCC.



One of the problems the reordering of the landscape at Lake Itasca was supposed to resolve was the inherently unstable concept of a river's "headwaters." In hydrology, the term "headwaters" refers to "first-order streams," that is, streams with no tributaries.<sup>20</sup> Thus, any large river has thousands of "headwaters": the many streams that have no tributaries themselves but that contribute water to a river. On the other hand, the colloquial meaning of "headwaters" is source or origin; the problem here is that there is no definitive rule for determining the "source" of a river and no "authorities." As Andrew Johnston, geographer at the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum, who is credited by the National Geographic Society as discerning the source of the Amazon River in 2000, maintains, "there is a lack of scholarly references on defining river sources."<sup>21</sup> One could argue that all the precipitation falling in a watershed constitutes the "source" of a river, but typically rivers are traced with reference to surface water flowage. Even if one accepts that a river has a *single* source, there is still no single way to decide, when moving upstream, which of two confluent streams should be considered the continuation of a river and which the tributary. Johnston explains that "there are several ways to define the 'source' of a river. A traditional way is to follow a river upstream, selecting the tributary with greatest flow rate at each branch. Another way is to measure the tributary with greatest length or change in altitude."<sup>22</sup> None of these methods, however, is given "in nature"; each is simply a convention, a set of ideas about what defines a river, and practices that define or constitute particular rivers, making them intelligible to us as objects. And yet, they are contested ideas and practices, placing any particular claim about the origin of a river in doubt.

In the case of the Mississippi, the situation is further complicated by naming practices. In his *Geography of Water* Ralph Olson admits that "the nomenclature of the Mississippi system is somewhat confusing in that the tributary originating in the glacial lakes of Minnesota, which gives its name to the main stem of the stream, is neither the longest of the major affluents (the Missouri) nor the one which contributes the most water (the Ohio)."<sup>23</sup> The landscape work performed by the CCC at Lake Itasca helped obscure these uncertainties by *making* the Itasca outlet into "the headwaters of the Mississippi," both physically and discursively. By altering the Itasca outlet for tourism and by erecting a permanent feature (the concrete dam), the CCC made the landscape fit the idea of a headwaters in order to stabilize the claims of this site to be "the source" of the Mississippi.

This work of landscape also continues and restages scientific explorations of the nineteenth century and before. Tourist apparatuses in the park, such as

exhibits in the Jacob V. Brower Visitors' Center, pamphlets, and informational signs, help script the landscape to narrate explorations of the Mississippi River, the interior of North America, and the "discovery" of the river's source (fig. 4). The narrative created is one of increasingly accurate knowledge of the course of the Mississippi, beginning in the sixteenth century, cresting with the 1832 visit to and naming of Lake Itasca by Henry Schoolcraft,<sup>24</sup> and culminating in the "definitive" scientific study of the sources of the river by Brower in 1889. The retelling of this historical narrative works to assure visitors that they are, indeed, visiting the "true" source of the Mississippi, established through a centuries-long process of heroic exploration and confirmed by scientific principles.

This narrative, presented through the tourist infrastructure, assumes that *knowledge* is the problem, while the object to be known, the river, exists as an ahistorical entity. However, a critical rereading of the history of the determination of the course of the Mississippi River reveals that knowledge itself, specifically scientific knowledge, has been the instrument through which a thoroughly ambiguous construct—"the Mississippi River"—was constituted as a unified, "natural" object as part of the process of national territorialization.

## European Exploration and Border Territorialization

Why was it so important to have a definitive determination of the source of the Mississippi? Up through the nineteenth century, the main impetus for Europeans and Euro-Americans to explore the upper Mississippi had its roots in a specific European colonial practice, namely, the convention used in the New World that defined European territorial claims by the watersheds of rivers that emptied into the sea.<sup>25</sup> So, for example, in 1682 the French explorer La Salle performed a ceremony near the mouth of the Mississippi declaring French possession of all the territory drained by the river. By doing so, La Salle was perhaps the first to constitute this territory as a unified whole (he was also the first to refer to it as Louisiana). In a sense, then, the claiming ceremony performed by La Salle was among the first of many European and Euro-American re-territorializations.<sup>26</sup> By bringing "Louisiana" into the regimes of European knowledge and politics—even in the vague and abstract way that he did—La Salle made the territory bounded by the watershed of the Mississippi—and the river itself—an important feature of the emerging political landscape of North America.<sup>27</sup>

After La Salle, numerous European treaties made the Mississippi River an important line of demarcation between rival territorial claims, thus transforming La Salle's abstraction into a concrete geographical problem for Europeans.

### The Name "Itasca"

Henry Schoolcraft conceived the name Itasca. Although popular folklore suggests the beautiful lake is named after a legendary Indian maiden whose mournful tears for her lost lover form the infant river, the truth is apparently otherwise. On his historic journey to the source, Schoolcraft,— with the help of an educated missionary companion— prepared the name from the Latin words for "truth" and "head" by linking adjoining syllables: verITAS CAput.

Whatever its origin, the name has a magic that survives today. Its fame has surpassed even the expectations of the mineralogist-explorer who created it a century and a half ago.

### Itasca State Park

The state legislature acted in 1891 to set aside land for one of Minnesota's first and now one of the nation's oldest state parks. Thanks in large part to the efforts of one man, Jacob Brower, the park's first commissioner and an early proponent of wilderness resources conservation, the park survived the depredations of the turn-of-the-century lumber barons who logged off portions of the magnificent pine forests.

Today the giant red or Norway pines—some of them nearly 300 years old—are the distinctive signature of the 32,000 acres of preserved wilderness. The source of the Mississippi, which begins its 2,500-mile journey at the northern tip of Lake Itasca, has become a summer pilgrimage of moment for millions of Americans.

*Main text by Steve Hall, Minnesota Historical Society.*

### Important Dates in Tracing the Exploration of the Great River

- 1541— Hernando de Soto, Spanish explorer, traveling overland, reaches the Mississippi River near what is now Arkansas.
- 1673 — Marquette and Joliet explore the lower Mississippi.
- 1680 — Father Louis Hennepin and Antoine Auguelle discover and name the Falls of St. Anthony near the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers.
- 1682 — LaSalle, at the mouth of the Mississippi, claims the land drained by the waterway of France.
- 1798 — David Thompson, British surveyor, finds what is today known as Turtle Lake north of Bemidji.
- 1805-06 — Zebulon Pike explores the upper Mississippi. He describes Leech Lake as the main source of the great river and Red Cedar Lake (Cass Lake) as the upper source.
- 1804, 1811 — William Morrison, fur trader, passes "Lac La Biche" (now Lake Itasca) on two different trading journeys.
- 1820 — Louis Cass reaches Cass Lake, then considered the true source. 27-year-old Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a member of this expedition, takes note that Cass Lake has two inlets!
- 1823 — Giacomo C. Beltrami, the romantic Italian, travels east from the Red River of the North to name and proclaim Lake Julia (headwaters of the Turtle River) as the source of both the Mississippi and the Red River of the North.
- July 13, 1832 — Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Ojibwe guide, Ozawindib, reach Lake Itasca.
- 1836 — Joseph N. Nicollet, French explorer and scientist, explores the tributaries to Lake Itasca and proclaims the longest one, now Nicollet Creek, as "truly the infant Mississippi according to geographic rule."
- 1872 — Julius Chambers travels to Lake Itasca for "health reasons" and claims the creek between Elk Lake and Lake Itasca (now Chambers Creek) as "the source of the longest river in the world."
- 1881 — Captain Willard Glazier visits and renames Elk Lake as Glazier Lake and claims discovery of the source of the Mississippi River.
- 1889 — Jacob V. Brower studies topography of Itasca basin and confirming the work of Nicollet and Schoolcraft, concludes that several creeks contribute to Lake Itasca but only at Itasca's outlet is a river formed.
- 1891 — Itasca State Park is established, and Jacob V. Brower is appointed first park commissioner.

DISCOVER ITASCA is a series of leaflets prepared by the Minnesota State Park Interpretive Program,  
Division of Parks and Recreation, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.  
This is title number:

**4**

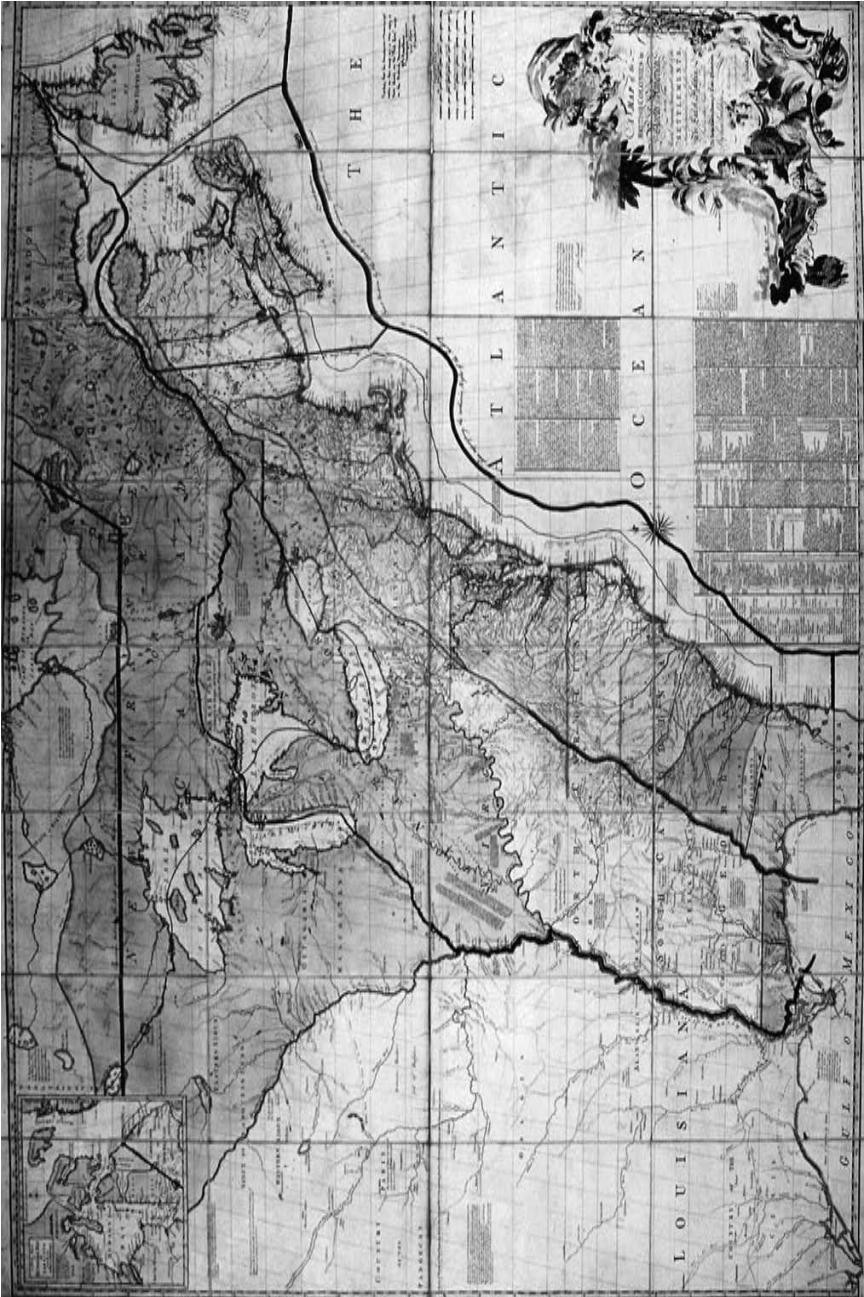
For example, in 1783 when Britain signed a peace treaty with the United States formally ending the American War of Independence, the agreement made the western portion of the U.S. boundary “a line” running “to the most north-westernmost point thereof [of the Lake of the Woods], and from thence on a due west course to the river Mississippi; thence by a line to be drawn along the middle of the said river Mississippi until it shall intersect the northernmost part of the thirty-first degree of north latitude, South.”<sup>28</sup> Essentially, the Mississippi became the western border of the United States. The official map used in the U.S.-British peace negotiations was the 1755 map made by John Mitchell (fig. 5). Mitchell’s map, like many of the period, had the Mississippi disappearing off the edge of the sheet, and Mitchell noted that “The Head of the Mississippi [*sic*] is not yet known: It is supposed to arise about the 50th degree of Latitude.”<sup>29</sup> This was because the source of the Mississippi had not yet been determined or mapped by Europeans.

**Figure 4.**

Excerpt from a pamphlet distributed to tourists at Lake Itasca State Park. From “Charting Lake Itasca”, *Discovering Itasca*, No. 4, n.d., Natural Resources Department, Parks and Recreation Division, State Parks files, Itasca State Park, location: 111.G.5.5B. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

J. B. Harley maintains that European maps of the colonial period, such as the Mitchell Map, should be viewed as “statements of territorial appropriation.”<sup>30</sup> That is, they are assertions that seek to impose European ownership on indigenous territory, and, as such, they are part of the process of territorialization. It is through the process of exploration

and asserting rights that actual spaces in North America are brought into conformation with maps drawn up in Europe. The “lines” mentioned in the treaty texts are literally the pen lines drawn on maps by treaty negotiators; it is through the *demarkation* of boundaries on the ground through scientific procedures such as surveying, astronomical observation, and so on—as well as the exercise of military force—that space is made into *territory*. In the case of central North America, European “statements of territorial appropriation,” such as the Mitchell Map and the 1783 treaty, relied upon knowledge of the Mississippi River. However, knowledge of the river as an *object* with certain qualities and a certain extent was unstable, spotty, shifting, contested: the river itself had not yet been constituted as a fixed object within European knowledge regimes, and, therefore, the process of territorialization through boundary demarcation remained incomplete. In this sense, the ambiguity of the northwest section of the newly formed United States cast doubt on the integrity of the new state simply by being borderless. As James Scott and others have





noted, knowledge of a nation's territory is central to the understanding of what constitutes a modern state.<sup>31</sup> Under the terms of the 1783 treaty, however, the northwest area of the United States remained unmappable and unknowable until the Mississippi could be stabilized as an object.

## U.S. Exploration, Nature, and Territorialization

The importance of the Mississippi River to national territorialization through the demarcation of borders continued into the era of U.S. exploration, especially after the Louisiana Purchase. Although the Mississippi ceased to mark the western limit of the United States after 1803, its watershed still defined the extent of the newly acquired territory. The source of the river, which at this point had still not been mapped definitively, remained important to determining the boundary between U.S. and British territory, which became an increasingly pressing issue as more trappers and traders from both Britain and the United States began frequenting the region.

**Figure 5.**  
The Mitchell Map. Courtesy of the  
Osher Map Library, University of  
Southern Maine.

It was in this context that Lieutenant Zebulon Pike was dispatched by the U.S. Army in 1805 to map the source of the river and to assert U.S. government presence there, as a means of establishing control over trade in the area. Pike's expedition served to further the project of bringing the Mississippi into regimes of formal knowledge, a process by which the area around the upper Mississippi is, to borrow phrasing from Bruce Braun, simultaneously abstracted and displaced from existing local cultural and political contexts and resituated in the rhetorical space of the nation.<sup>32</sup> That this is also a process of *re*-territorialization is clear when we acknowledge that, at the time of Pike's trip, traders in the area had visited Elk Lake (also known as Lac La Biche), which was said to be the source of the Mississippi. Certainly, native peoples knew of Elk Lake (called Omoskos by the Chippewa), and, based on information given to subsequent white explorers, it seems they considered it the source of the Mississippi.<sup>33</sup> Because of bad weather, Pike never reached Elk Lake; instead, he simply labeled his most northerly location as the source of the Mississippi. The discrepancy between local and indigenous knowledge of Elk Lake and Pike's assertion of the river's source meant that the location of the border between the United States and Canada, tied to the Mississippi watershed, was still uncertain: the territory of the nation had not been stabilized.<sup>34</sup>

In 1818 the United States and Britain signed a treaty that made the 49th parallel the boundary between U.S. and British possessions west of the Great

Lakes, thus rendering the bounds of the watershed of the Mississippi—and, therefore, the river itself—meaningless in terms of defining territorial extent along the northern border of the United States.<sup>35</sup> This moved the search for the source of the Mississippi into a new phase, for the federal government continued to charge expeditions with finding the origin of the river, because the search for the source of the Mississippi was still part of the process of territorializing the nation.

As others have pointed out, the concept of national territorialization has typically been discussed in political geography and international relations within a realist framework that privileges boundary demarcation and takes territory itself for granted, rather than seeing it as the product of socio-spatial processes that assign meaning to various spaces and make those spaces available to the nation. According to John Agnew, “typically . . . human territoriality is seen as the strategy whereby individuals and groups exercise control over a *given* portion of space.”<sup>36</sup> But, as Agnew points out, “territoriality is put into practice through . . . popular acceptance of *classifications* of space (e.g., ‘ours’ versus ‘yours’).” This is especially so when considering processes of colonization whereby territorial belonging is reassigned: territory that was once “theirs” is made “ours.”<sup>37</sup> The assignment of meaning to territory takes place not only in the “cultural” realm of literature and travel narratives, but through scientific practices, including mapping and other forms of geographical knowledge production.<sup>38</sup> Wainwright and Robertson argue that “scientific practices may make the territory of the state appear stable, uncontested and complete.”<sup>39</sup> This is made clear in Braun’s study of the geological work of George Dawson in western British Columbia in the 1870s and ’80s; Braun shows that in Dawson’s science “‘land’ was made to appear as ‘nature’: a space that held no signs of ‘culture’ and therefore could be appropriated into the administrative space of the ‘nation.’”<sup>40</sup> The scientific production of “natural” objects—that is, making them appear as stable, timeless objects separate from the human realm—is part of the way that colonizing states produce national territory. A similar process was at work in the post-1818 expeditions in search of the source of the Mississippi, which center on the important role of Henry Schoolcraft, who is widely credited with “discovering” the source of the river.

Schoolcraft participated in two trips in search of the source of the Mississippi. The first, in 1820, was led by Lewis Cass, governor of the Michigan Territory, which included modern-day Minnesota, with Schoolcraft acting as mineralogist and cartographer. Twelve years later, in 1832, Schoolcraft, as superintendent of Indian Affairs for Michigan, headed an expedition of his own, with a mission similar to Cass’s: together with a military escort, he was



to visit tribes in the area around the sources of the Mississippi to assert U.S. government control over the fur trade and, if possible, map the source of the river.<sup>41</sup> When Schoolcraft set out, it was accepted that the Mississippi had its source at Elk Lake/Lac La Biche. This “fact” had been conveyed to government officials; whites as well as Native Americans were known to have visited it. However, it had yet to be brought formally—that is “scientifically”—into the regimes of Euro-American knowledge: it had not yet been fixed on a map through proper procedures, such as empirical observation (i.e., visiting the lake), taking appropriate measurements and approximating an absolute location on the globe.

This was partially accomplished by the Schoolcraft expedition. Schoolcraft’s party, led by an Ojibwa guide named Ozawindib (or “Yellow Head”), reached Elk Lake, now renamed Itasca, on July 13 (fig. 6). Lieutenant James Allen, head of the military escort, produced the first map of the area based on first-hand knowledge and estimated the absolute location of the lake. According to Allen’s journal,

There can be no doubt but that this is the *true source and fountain of the longest and largest branch of the Mississippi*. All our information that we had been able to collect on the way, from traders and Indians, pointed to it as such; and our principal Indian guide, Yellow Head, who has proved to us his close intelligence of the country, represents the same. . . . In fact, the whole country showed that there was no stream beyond, for the lake was shut in on all sides by pine hills, and the only opening through them was that by which it discharged itself.<sup>42</sup>

The Schoolcraft party spent only a few hours at Itasca before descending the river and did not examine the environs beyond what was described by Allen. The trip was celebrated throughout the country, with accounts published in newspapers from Michigan to New York, proclaiming a significant national triumph.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, it is important to remember the context of Schoolcraft’s trip: the source of the Mississippi had ceased to have any importance regarding the boundaries of the nation sixteen years earlier. Schoolcraft visits a lake that was already widely considered to be the source of the river, yet he renames it. Allen makes some rather tentative calculations based on estimated distances they had traveled. No astronomical observations were taken, and the party hardly had time for even a cursory topographical survey. Instead they took as “fact” Ozawindib’s view that this lake was the “source” of the Mississippi and that no other significant streams emptied into the lake. The importance of this (non) event can be understood as one in which “the Mississippi” is resituated in the rhetorical space of the nation. In other words, Schoolcraft’s “achievement” was



**Figure 6.** A romantic depiction of the Schoolcraft expedition by Seth Eastman. From Mary H. Eastman, *The American Aboriginal Portfolio*, illustrated by S. Eastman (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1853).

to take existing local and indigenous knowledges and re-territorialize them through the scientific operations of empirical observation, calculation, and cartography to produce an object

of national knowledge. Consider, for example, the language in this newspaper review of Schoolcraft’s and Allen’s accounts:

And this is the stream, so grand and beautiful, whose very tide alone . . . would steal one away from the vulgar haunts of men, and lure him on unconsciously into the wilderness, whose sources have been but now explored. . . . [I]t is only now, when the commerce of an Empire is floating upon its bosom, that we know where the Father of Rivers takes his rise.<sup>44</sup>

The nation’s nature is made available through the regimes of science; that is, the project of nation building requires that the Mississippi become intelligible by a series of epistemological procedures that cannot be disentangled from the processes of colonialism through which the territories were violently transferred from indigenous peoples to the United States—and here it is important to remember that each of the two expeditions Schoolcraft was on (as well as others) had as its *primary* mission a show of military force in the area. The river is made to appear as objective “nature,” luring men “unconsciously into the wilderness,” a realm apart from human habitation (“the vulgar haunts of men”), devoid of indigenous presence. Thus cleansed, the river can now be easily incorporated into the imagined geography of the nation as part of its territory.

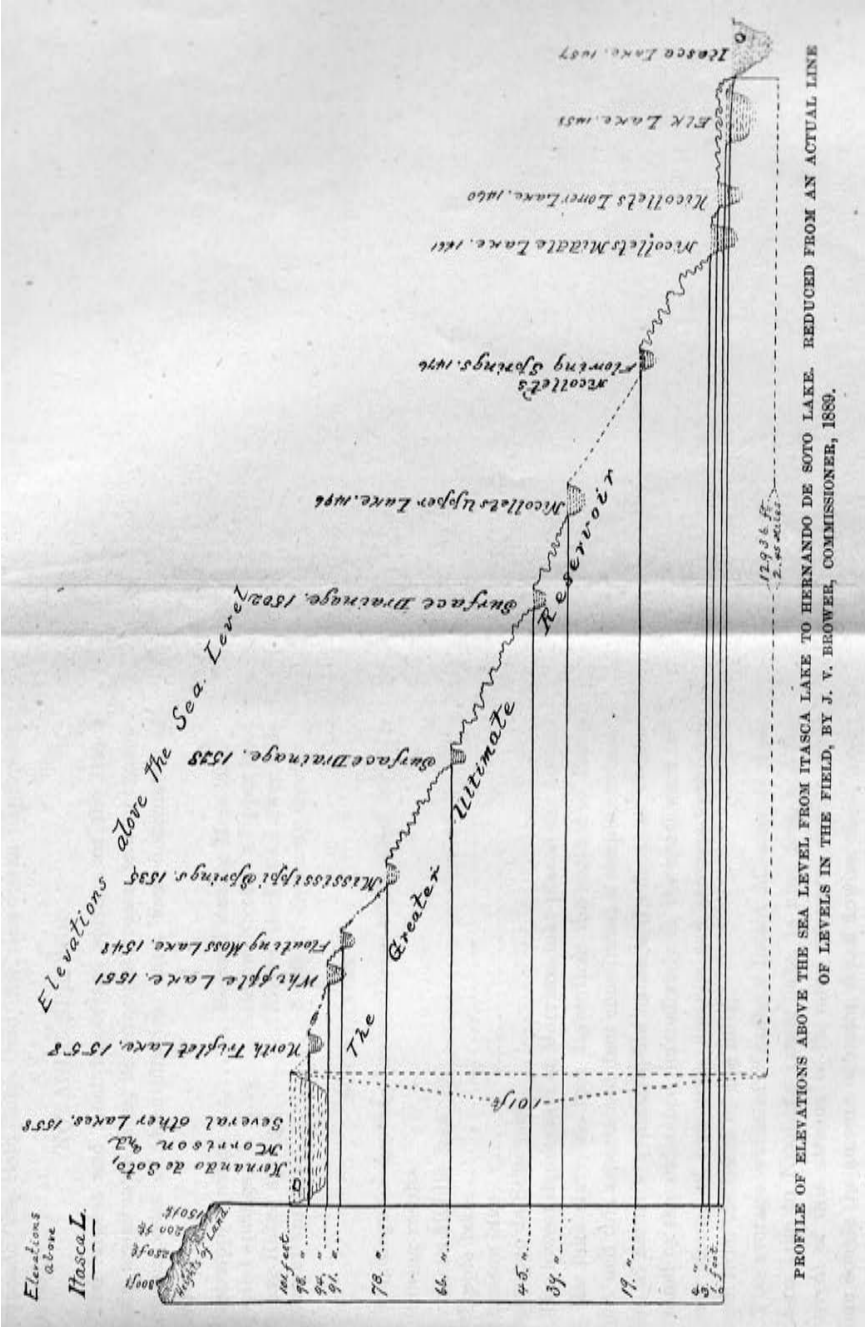
However, four years later, Jean Nicolle visited the Itasca basin with astronomical instruments and made a survey of the area, maintaining that a small

stream entering the west arm of the lake “is truly the infant Mississippi.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, in 1836, the first topographical survey of the Itasca basin, coupled with the first astronomical observations from the area, fixed the location of both Lake Itasca and the Mississippi River on the map. Nicollet’s claims introduced uncertainty about the “true source” of the river, whether it originated in Lake Itasca, or somewhere else, upstream from the lake. This uncertainty led to a series of competing claims about where the actual source of the river lay. The standard way to narrate the ensuing disputes is to characterize them as contestations that are ultimately adjudicated by more accurate knowledge.<sup>46</sup> However, read critically, these disputes point to the ongoing process of fixing the nation’s nature in scientific regimes of knowledge—to make them appear as stable, coherent, and timeless natural objects. This struggle becomes clearer when we turn to the work of Jacob Brower.

### Jacob Brower and the Itasca State Park

The problem that Jacob Brower faced in the 1880s was that several subsequent explorations had contested Schoolcraft’s and Nicollet’s claims about the source of the river, including, most infamously, that of Willard Glazier. Glazier visited the Itasca basin in 1884 and claimed that the small lake to the south of the western arm of Itasca was the “true source of the Mississippi”; he renamed the small pool Lake Glazier and published his account, complete with maps using the new name. Glazier’s claims caused such controversy that the Minnesota State Legislature got involved, passing a law in 1889 prohibiting school maps from carrying the name Lake Glazier.<sup>47</sup> The ongoing controversy spurred the Minnesota Historical Society to charge Brower with determining the “true and actual source of the Mississippi River.” So, Brower set out to clear up the record by conducting a rigorous scientific study of the Itasca basin. His report, which took up an entire volume of the Minnesota Historical Society’s Collections, included a historical survey of the exploration of the Mississippi, as well as a series of hydrographical charts intended to settle the question of the river’s origin (figs. 7, 8). In effect, to borrow the phrasing of Bruce Braun, Brower was attempting to “restag[e] the landscape as a solely hydrological artefact.”<sup>48</sup>

What Brower found was that following the longest channel rule—or, as he put it, “the *longest* surface channel must be followed in order to find the utmost Source” of a river—would take him not just *to* Lake Itasca but *beyond it*.<sup>49</sup> Brower placed the first channel of the Mississippi, not at the north end of the lake, where Schoolcraft had, but flowing into Itasca at the southwest, concurring with Nicollet that this stream was, in fact, “truly the infant Mississippi” (fig. 9). Brower explains:



However desirable it might be to continue th[e] preference for Itasca lake, it can be but a question of sentiment, for certainly it is not one of fact; . . . a rule has been followed which *nature itself* dictates, as the only and reasonable procedure by which to find the true source of the Mississippi.

These conclusions are by no means hastily drawn, nor are they deemed to be of any very great importance. It is simply a verification of the discovery of geographic facts. They become of interest, that *the minutest fibers of nature's cause, shall not be infringed*.<sup>50</sup>

This passage is part of a “memorandum,” a footnote consisting of four and a half pages of tiny text, appended to the end of Brower’s 296-page report. In this note Brower attempts to reassure the reader that his report is based purely on a “science” that follows “nature” and that it has been purged of all “sentiment.”

This is indeed how Brower’s report was seen. Volume 8 of the Minnesota Historical Society Collections (the volume following Brower’s report) carried an essay by a M. Levasseur of the Institute of France, who says of Brower’s report: “As to scientific debate, it is terminated. The exploration of Mr. Brower leaves no further room

**Figure 7.**  
Hydrographical chart made by  
Brower. From Brower, “Missis-  
sippi River.”

for controversy. Mr. Glazier’s adventure will have had the merit of hastening the conclusion, and of giving to geography a definitive map of the cradle of one of the greatest rivers of the world.”<sup>51</sup> It was also definitive enough to cause the Minnesota State Legislature to create its first state park.<sup>52</sup>

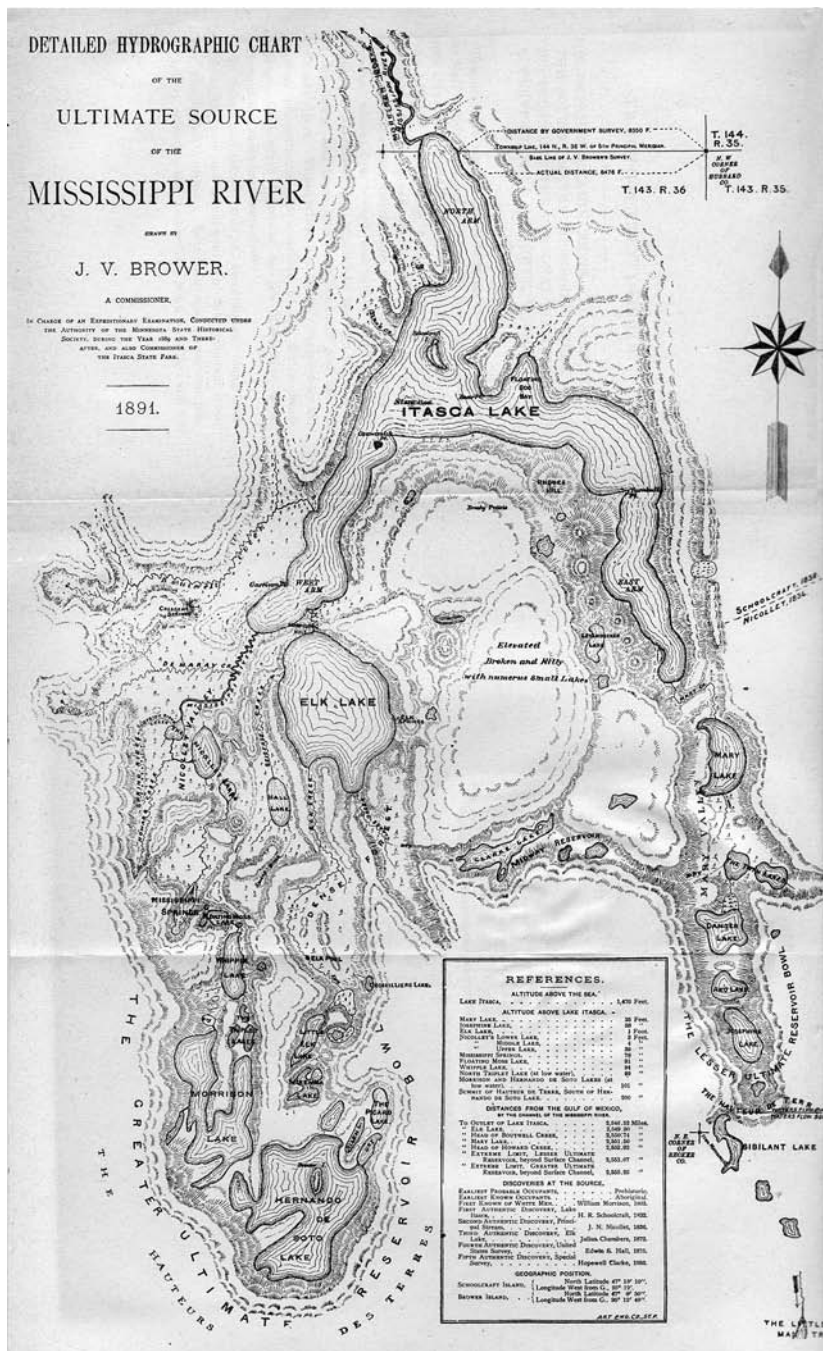
Brower’s report was considered “definitive” because it was seen as following rigorous scientific procedures, among the most important of which was that Brower used no indigenous sources, a fact that distinguished his study from all previous ones; as he notes,

the time is past when the aborigines are needed, or their aid required for reliable geographic facts; indeed, as a rule, Indian maps have always been but distortions. . . . The Spanish and French maps bear earmarks of information communicated by Indians, coupled with the accuracy and improvements of civilized observation, until the days of M. Nicollet, in 1836, when the first exhaustive chart of the upper waters of the Mississippi was constructed and he, too, depended largely upon semi-civilized knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

At several places in his text, Brower also makes a special point of the fact that in his study, “no Indians or guides were employed.”<sup>54</sup> It is here that we can see clearly that the process of bringing the Mississippi into European regimes of knowledge was one of repeated re-territorializations.

And yet there is a fundamental problem in Brower’s text, namely, that following the longest surface channel rule from the mouth of the Mississippi would take one up the Missouri and into Montana (see page 310). This problem





threatens the whole “scientific” basis of Brower’s work and the whole project of “scientifically” determining the source of the river. It unfixes the river from the regimes of science. It is why Brower appends such a strange note to the end of his report; that he felt the need to do so is an indication of just how great a threat it was to his project; he tells us that he even solicited opinions from the Royal Geographical Society, which responded that it had “never laid down any rule for defining what constitutes the source of a river,” as well as from prominent geographer W. M. Davis, who “inclines to the longest surface channel” rule.<sup>55</sup>

The manner in which Brower solves the problem of the Missouri bears quoting at length:

However desirable it might be to reverse the order of the well established geography concerning the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, in order that the longest channel may be designated [*sic*] as the one principal stream—a necessity, if this limited rule must be followed—it should be remembered and properly considered that, from the earliest times coming within human knowledge, pre-historic, aboriginal, Spanish, French, English and American, every recognition has pointed to the great valley and its river as the main water-shed, to the exclusion of the Missouri, and upon this rule of action, tribal possessions, international boundary lines, enactments by Congress, Articles of War and Treaties of Peace in Europe and America, reciprocal concessions, government appropriations and improvements, commercial traffic, state boundaries, educational teachings and the nomenclature of portions of the Federal Union, have adhered—all this and more—in consonance with the great topographic features of nature as they exist the whole length and breadth of the Mississippi River basin, with the Missouri as [*sic*] a confluent river coming in at one side. It would appear that this rule, “that the *longest* surface channel must be followed in order to find the utmost Source” of the Mississippi, is in direct conflict with every *natural cause*. . . . If, for these and other reasons, such a rule is too narrow and limited to be effective and consistent, why follow it, when to do so would unsettle and bring into conflict the foundations of territorial [*sic*] organizations, commercial and other numerous municipal relations, heretofore deemed and believed to correspond with nature’s topographic facts and conditions?<sup>56</sup>

**Figure 8.**  
Hydrographical chart made by Brower.  
From Brower, “Mississippi River.”

A schizophrenia in Brower’s text is revealed here. He must follow a rigorous scientific procedure; yet, no adequate rule exists that will at once dispel all disputes about the origin of the river and simultaneously locate it in Minnesota. On the one hand he banishes “sentiment” from causing him to stop at Itasca, and yet “sentiment” and tradition are the very things that he invokes here to solve this dilemma. And, crucially, to make his claims transcend any particular social construction and appear to “correspond with nature’s topographic facts,” he must begin that “tradition” with indigenous knowledge.<sup>57</sup> each of the two





**Figure 9.**

Detail of figure 8, showing the first channel of the Mississippi River as labeled by Brower.

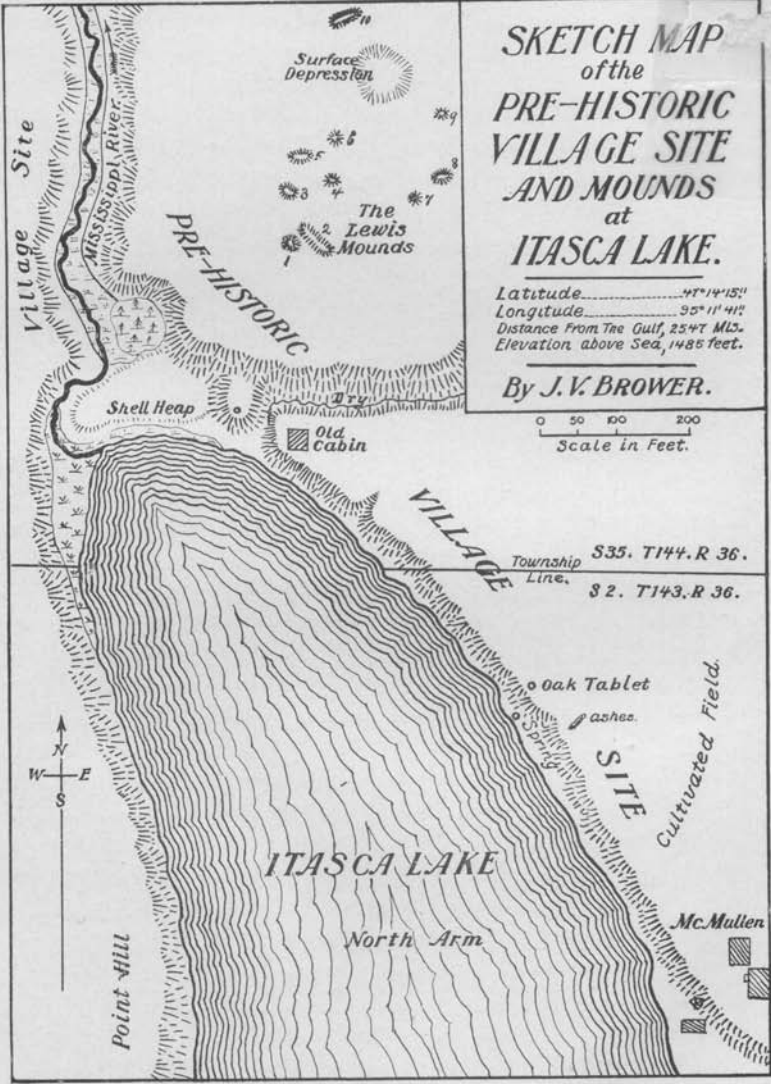
strings of knowledges and practices that form the backbone of his proof recapitulates the narratives of re-territorialization.

In Brower's account, knowledge of the river is passed seamlessly from indigenous peoples (even back to prehistory) to Europeans and then to Americans. And to these socially constructed knowledges, Brower gives the label "natural cause[s]." The distinction between nature and culture that is the foundation for Brower's scientific study collapses, and we are left only with a string of socially constructed knowledges and objects, that is, with social nature.

There's an irreducible contradiction in Brower's project: his "science," which tries so hard to displace native presence is continually brought back to native knowledge. To justify his study, he traces his knowledge back to prehistory. Given such a move, it is clear that there is no story of discovery, only a history of appropriation and re-territorialization. Geographical knowledge of the source of the river—a socially constructed object—was present in indigenous forms when Europeans arrived, and *crucially* Europeans and Euro-Americans appropriated this knowledge and stamped it as their own. Native knowledge and presence is simultaneously inscribed in Brower's "scientific" and "objective" study and disavowed, denied, erased, made to appear as separate from it. The history Brower recounts, and participates in, is the story of colonial knowledge production. The Mississippi River, including its "headwaters," which was produced through the re-territorializations of "science," is an artifact of colonial knowledge and not a "natural" object.

Brower seems to have been aware of the contradiction at the heart of his project. The strange note appended to his report, perhaps, signals the dawning of this realization on him, because immediately following his appointment as Itasca State Park superintendent, he embarked on a kind of ethno-archaeological study of prehistorical sites in the Itasca region that appear to be intended to “solve” his dilemma. His findings, published in the Minnesota Historical Society Collections in the volume immediately following his report on the source of the river, described about fifty sites containing burial mounds and ruins of settlements, including hearths, dwellings, spear heads, pottery, and jewelry (fig. 10).<sup>58</sup> Brower’s study of mounds and settlements in the Itasca region seems intended to heal the logical breach in his work on the source of the Mississippi. It does so by embracing an outmoded theory that the original people of North America were an extinct people, racially superior to and more culturally advanced than the Native American Indians encountered by Europeans, and that these “lost people” are the so-called Mound Builders. Such a theory had been popular throughout the nineteenth century,<sup>59</sup> but had been discredited largely through the work of Cyrus Thomas of the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology in the 1880s. Thomas’s comprehensive work had shown conclusively that “all the mounds which have been examined and carefully studied are to be attributed to the indigenous tribes found inhabiting this region [the Mississippi valley] and their ancestors.”<sup>60</sup>

A decade after Thomas, Brower ascribes the burial mounds in the Itasca basin to an exalted “lost race” and argues that the presence of artifacts of the “Mound-Builders” in the Itasca region proves that they—and not the Native Americans—were the ones “who first penetrated to, and probably originally discovered, the source of the Mississippi.”<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Brower argues that this “lost race” was white: “the Itasca and the Tascodiac skulls show a remarkable perfection of the human brain at that early period, as regular in symmetrical outlines and formation as the white population of the present time.”<sup>62</sup> Essentially, Brower is using the presence of burial mounds and the Mound Builder theory to displace indigenous knowledge of the river in a way that his earlier study could not achieve. Native Americans may have had knowledge about the source of the river, but they were not the creators of such knowledge; instead, they merely appropriated it from a scientifically advanced people who were white. The knowledge passed down the chain of history to Brower himself, which forms the grounds for his claims about the source of the Mississippi, is cleansed of its native origins. The narrative of discovery is whitened, and the Mississippi River itself is rendered a natural object of purely Euro-American knowledge. The presence of Native Americans in the story is no longer a threat, as they now become a passing historical phase.



MAP OF THE LEWIS MOUNDS AND PREHISTORIC VILLAGE SITE AT THE NORTH END OF ITASCA LAKE.

Just as the re-territorializations of the Mississippi by Euro-American regimes of knowledge cannot be disentangled from the actual removal of Native Americans from the land, Brower's purging of native presence from the narrative of discovery is wrapped up in the physical purging of Native Americans from the Mississippi region. Elsewhere in his discussion of the burial mounds, Brower revels in the "assured disappearance" of Native Americans, a "final result concisely rapid and silently sure."<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Brower himself was a participant in the forced removal of Native Americans from Minnesota. He had been a young soldier in the U.S. Army's 1863 campaign against the Lakota, which culminated in the infamous hanging of thirty-nine men (the largest capital punishment case in U.S. history).<sup>64</sup> The man who carried out the executions on direct orders from Abraham Lincoln and who was Brower's commanding

**Figure 10.**

Map by Brower showing mounds at the northern end of Lake Itasca. From Brower, "Prehistoric Man," 249.

officer was General H. H. Sibley, who was president of the Minnesota Historical Society in 1889 when that body charged Brower with studying the Itasca basin. The project of fixing the Mississippi River as a "natural" object

autonomous from indigenous forms of knowledge is part of the process of conquest by which indigenous lands were violently transferred to Euro-Americans and re-territorialized. The Mississippi River, made intelligible as a "natural" object and cleansed of indigenous presence through the re-territorializations of "science" and military conquest, is itself an artifact of colonialism.

## Conclusion

This story contains yet a further contradiction. Brower's report was officially accepted by the state of Minnesota and codified as the document that forms the scientific basis for Itasca State Park. It has also been accepted by the park service itself and incorporated into the tourist apparatus: the chronology on display at the visitors' center ends with Brower: "1889—Jacob V. Brower studies topography of Itasca basin and confirming the work of Nicollet and Schoolcraft, concludes that several creeks contribute to Lake Itasca but only at Itasca's outlet is a river formed" (see fig. 4).<sup>65</sup> As we saw, however, Brower labeled a stream at the southern end of the lake the "Mississippi River," a stream now known as Nicollet Creek. The "headwaters" site, on the other hand, is at the *northern* end of the lake, not where Brower placed it at all. And this, finally, brings us back to the CCC project of the 1930s. Itasca State Park chief Lang's carefully worded text (see above) points us once again to the socially constructed nature of the Mississippi and the work of landscape at Itasca State Park. The CCC

project “restored” the “*established source*” of the river at the north end of the lake, a phrase that carries with it, not the weight of Brower’s science, but the force of “sentiment” and tradition. When time came in the 1930s to create a tourist landscape at the park, a site was chosen not on the basis of science but on sentiment: the idea that the nation needed a definitive beginning point for its great river, a sight that matches the *idea* of what the “source” of a river should look like. Through the work of the CCC, the Mississippi was re-territorialized once more, the small stream entering Itasca was renamed Nicollet Creek, and the beginning of the river was fixed at the northern end of the lake, the stability of this fixing assured by the physical reordering of the landscape.

The final irony is that this production of the river fixes its origin precisely where Ozawindib placed it when he showed it to Schoolcraft. In the end, the scripting of the site as the outcome of repeated explorations and discoveries by Europeans and Euro-Americans is completely superfluous—superfluous, that is, to determining the “source” of the river, but absolutely necessary to the colonial process of re-territorialization through which “the Mississippi” is made intelligible to national knowledge and fixed as a stable and timeless “natural” object. The tourist landscape at Itasca State Park is an active instance of colonial cartography carried forward into the postcolonial present. Wainwright and Robertson argue that “territorialization is never completed, but is an iterative process which states must continually perform.”<sup>66</sup> Itasca State Park helps to continually stabilize the objectivity of the river *and* the territory of the nation: the Mississippi River becomes the “natural” and “objective” vehicle for Minnesota’s national belonging, and the reiteration of the objectivity and “nature” of the Mississippi River relies on and restages the colonial narrative of territorialization. The landscape at Lake Itasca makes the headwaters rhetorically available for use elsewhere, such as in the Ambrose and Brinkley book.

If historic landscapes, such as those discussed by Johnson, Till, and others, perform nationalist work through the “mobilization of an ‘imagined community’ of nationhood,” the headwaters at Lake Itasca works through an altogether different process.<sup>67</sup> In Benedict Anderson’s formulation, the cultural work of imagining community helps forge a “deep, horizontal comradeship” that is the foundation for national identity.<sup>68</sup> The process of national territorialization, then, consists of identifying the territorial extent of that imagined community; that is, national territory is assumed to be *coextensive with the people* who form the “deep, horizontal comradeship.” As Graham Smith explains, a nation is “imagined as *community* based on a territorial relationship.”<sup>69</sup> With the cultural imagining of community, territory occupied by members of that community automatically “belongs” to the nation (at least in theory, if not practice). This

may help describe the process of nation building (and conflict) in Europe, where the nation-state ideal came to be the standard form of nationalism, but it does not fully apply to settler states such as Canada, Australia, or the United States, where “the people” had no prior association with or historical claim to the territory in question (barring Brower’s Mound Builders theory, of course). Imagining community was important to building national identity in these states, but the process of territorialization could not be based on the assumption that territory was a function of the historical location of the people who made up their imagined communities. Rather, territory preceded its formal occupancy by members of the national community. In colonizing states, therefore, territory was made to appear separate from *any* people, a geographical entity that was self-evident, timeless, and wholly “natural.” Thus, Bruce Braun argues that “nature” plays a crucial role in the process of creating the imagined geographies of colonial states.<sup>70</sup> In this way, the exploration of the Mississippi, the establishment of a stable source of the river, and the creation and maintenance of the headwaters landscape all help make the territory of the nation appear as a collection of stable, timeless, and self-evident natural objects. The Mississippi River is itself an artifact of this colonial history, a natural object that exists *because of*, not *despite*, that history, and one that is restaged and made available for contemporary uses by the tourist landscape at Lake Itasca.

## Notes

My thanks to Joel Wainwright, Morgan Robertson, Bruce Braun, Coleman Hutchison, Leo Zonn, Gretchen Murphy, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. Thanks also to Paul Hudson and Brian King for their conversations on matters riverine and natural.

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2. An Act to Grant Certain Public Lands to the State of Minnesota for Perpetual Use as a Public Park, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 27 (1892), 347.
3. George E. Hallberg, ed., *The Legislative Manual of the State of Minnesota* (Minnesota Secretary of State, 1897), 223.
4. Jacob V. Brower, “The Mississippi River and Its Source,” *Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 7 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Harrison & Smith, state printers, 1893), 1.
5. “Park Info: Itasca State Park,” Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, [http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state\\_parks/itasca/narrative.html](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/itasca/narrative.html) (accessed June 11, 2007).
6. R. C. Smith, Narrative Report for October 1934, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1953, Record Group 79, Box 71, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; R. C. Smith, Supplementary Narrative to Monthly Progress Report for February 1934, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1953, Record Group 79, Box 71, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Md. (hereafter NACP).



7. R. C. Smith, Fifth Period Progress & Summary Report, April 1, 1935, to September 30, 1935, Inclusive, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1953, Record Group 79, Box 71, NACP.
8. Stephen Ambrose and Douglas Brinkley, *The Mississippi and the Making of a Nation* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2002), 1. Turner struck a similar note in his famous frontier essay: “On the tide of the Father of Waters, North and South met and mingled into a nation.” Frederick Jackson Turner, *History, Frontier, and Section* (1893; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 81.
9. For example, see Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
10. For example, see Martin Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Martin Brückner and Hsuan L. Hsu, eds., *American Literary Geographies* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007); Rick Van Noy, *Surveying the Interior: Literary Cartographers and the Sense of Place* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003); Eric Bulson, *Novels, Maps, Modernity: The Spatial Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Helena Michie and Ronald Thomas, eds., *Nineteenth-Century Geographies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Ralph Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
11. Mary L. Dudziak and Leti Volpp, introduction to special issue: Legal Borderlands: Law and the Construction of American Borders, *American Quarterly* 57.3 (Fall 2005): 593–94.
12. Andrew Charlesworth, “Contesting Places of Memory: The Case of Auschwitz,” *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space* 12.5 (1994): 579–93; David Atkinson, and Denis Cosgrove, “Urban Rhetoric and Embodied Identities: City, Nation, and Empire at the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument in Rome, 1870–1945,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88.1 (1998): 28–49; Nuala Johnson, “Cast in Stone: Monuments, Geography, and Nationalism,” *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space* 13.1 (1995): 51–65; Nuala Johnson, *Ireland, the Great War, and the Geography of Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
13. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991); Johnson, *Ireland*, 3–4.
14. Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 33–37; Kay Anderson, “Culture and Nature at the Adelaide Zoo,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20.3 (1995): 275–94.
15. Bruce Willems-Braun, “Buried Epistemologies: The Politics of Nature in (Post)Colonial British Columbia,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87.1 (1997): 3–31; Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium* (New York: Verso, 1998); Noel Castree, *Nature* (London: Routledge, 2005); Noel Castree and Bruce Braun, *Social Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001); William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon, 69–90 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995); Scott Kirsch, “John Wesley Powell and the Mapping of the Colorado Plateau, 1869–1879,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92.3 (2002): 548–72; Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998); Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*.
16. See Willems-Braun, “Buried Epistemologies”; Joel Wainwright and Morgan Robertson, “Territorialization, Science, and the Colonial State: The Case of Highway 55 in Minnesota,” *Cultural Geographies* 10 (2003): 196–217; Daniel Clayton, “On the Colonial Genealogy of George Vancouver’s Chart of the North-West Coast of North America,” *Ecumene* 7.4 (2000): 371–401; Bruce Braun, “Producing Vertical Territory: Geology and Governmentality in Late Victorian Canada,” *Ecumene* 7.1 (2000): 7–46. I am arguing what David Demeritt calls the “heterogeneous constructionism” position: “that nature and the other things-in-the-world are disclosed to us as objects through practical engagements that configure them in ways that are recognizable for us and transforming of us”; David Demeritt, “The Construction of Global Warming and the Politics of Science,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91.2 (2001): 311.
17. As should be clear from the context, when I discuss the “production” of the Mississippi River as an object, I am not simply talking about human alterations made over time to control and regulate the river for navigation or to protect farmland and towns, such as channelization, dredging, building levees, or the construction of a system of dams and locks by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (on



- these types of alterations, see John Anfinson, *The River We Have Wrought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Calvin Fremling, *Immortal River* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005)).
18. Earl Lang, Proposed Work Plan for Unemployed, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1953, Record Group 79, Box 71, NACP.
  19. John C. Paige, *The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service* (Washington DC: National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1985).
  20. Robert Elmer Horton, “Erosional Development of Streams and Their Drainage Basins, Hydrophysical Approach to Quantitative Morphology,” *Geological Society of America Bulletin* 56.3 (1945): 275; Arthur Newell Strahler, “Quantitative Analysis of Watershed Geomorphology,” *Transactions—American Geophysical Union* 38 (1957): 913.
  21. Donald Smith, “Explorers Pinpoint Source of the Amazon,” *National Geographic News*, December 21, 2000, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2000/2012/1221amazon.html> (accessed February 14, 2008); Andrew Johnston, email message to author, February 13, 2008.
  22. Johnston, email message to author, February 13, 2008.
  23. Ralph E. Olson, *A Geography of Water* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1970), 72. The general problem of uneven geographical naming practices prompted President Benjamin Harrison in 1890 to create the United States Board of Geographic Names to bring about “a uniform usage and spelling of geographic names in the publications of the Government.” In its first report, the board explained: “It often happens in the case of the larger geographic features, such as extended mountain ranges, rivers, etc., that different names have been applied locally in different parts, and these different names have become well settled in usage.” See United States Board on Geographic Names, *First Report of the United States Board on Geographic Names, 1890–1891* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1892), 1, 4.
  24. Schoolcraft derived the name from the Latin words *verITAS Caput*, meaning true head. See Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Schoolcraft’s Expedition to Lake Itasca*, ed. Philip Mason (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1958).
  25. While this practice was neither codified legally nor uncontested, it was repeatedly cited as establishing a principle of colonial possession in the Americas. For example, see Thomas Jefferson, “The Limits and Bounds of Louisiana,” in *Documents Relating to the Purchase & Exploration of Louisiana* (1804; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 26.
  26. While, in a strict sense, every territorialization is a “re-territorialization” (that is, a reconfiguring of territoriality), I use the latter term throughout this article to call attention to the way that European actions were attempts to territorialize what was *already* territorialized, namely native landscapes.
  27. On La Salle, see Timothy Severin, *Explorers of the Mississippi* (1968; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); John Shea, *Discovery and Exploration of the Mississippi Valley* (New York: Clinton Hall, 1852); Brower, “Mississippi River.”
  28. See *United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 8, ed. Richard Peters (Boston: Little, Brown, 1867). The document, commonly known as the Treaty of Paris, 1783, appears on 80–83, as “Definitive Treaty of Peace Between the United States of America and his Britannic Majesty”; quote on 82.
  29. John Mitchell, *British Colonies in North America* [map] (London: John Mitchell, 1755). Information about the Mitchell Map, as well as a reproduction, can be found at the following: M. H. Edney, “The Mitchell Map: An Irony of Empire,” 1997, Osher Map Library, University of Southern Maine, online at <http://www.usm.maine.edu/maps/mitchell/history3.htm> (accessed January 13, 2010).
  30. J. Brian Harley, “Rereading the Maps of the Columbian Encounter,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82.3 (1992): 522.
  31. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998); Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
  32. Willems-Braun, “Buried Epistemologies,” 10.
  33. It appears that the lake, as the source of the Mississippi, did not hold any special cultural significance to any group, as it lay in a sort of no-man’s-land between Chippewa and Lakota bands. See Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, and Co., 1855).
  34. On Pike, see Zebulon Montgomery Pike, *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, ed. Elliott Coues (New York: F. P. Harper, 1895); Severin, *Explorers*; Brower, “Mississippi River.”

35. Convention of Commerce between His Majesty and the United States of America.—Signed at London, 20th October 1818, Canada-American Treaties, University of Montreal, [http://www.lexum.umontreal.ca/ca\\_us/en/cus.1818.15.en.html](http://www.lexum.umontreal.ca/ca_us/en/cus.1818.15.en.html) (accessed June 18, 2007).
36. John Agnew, "Territoriality," in *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, ed. R. J. Johnson, Derek Gregory and David M. Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), 620; emphasis added.
37. Emphasis in original. Said identifies a "universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs.'" However, in the case of settler colonization, it is "unfamiliar space" that is claimed as "ours." Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1995), 54.
38. See note 10; Said, *Orientalism*; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (New York: Verso, 1992).
39. Wainwright and Robertson, "Territorialization," 201.
40. Willems-Braun, "Buried Epistemologies," 12.
41. On Schoolcraft's expedition, see Brower, "Mississippi River"; Schoolcraft, *Discovery*; Philip P. Mason, ed. *Schoolcraft's Expedition to Lake Itasca: The Discovery of the Source of the Mississippi* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1958); Severin, *Explorers*.
42. Mason, *Schoolcraft's Expedition*, 205.
43. See Mason, *Schoolcraft's Expedition*, for a selection.
44. New York *American*, July 19, 1834, quoted in Mason, *Schoolcraft's Expedition*, 359.
45. Brower, "Mississippi River," 160.
46. See, for example, Severin, *Explorers*; Shea, *Discovery*; Brower, "Mississippi River."
47. An Act to Fix the Name of a Lake Formerly Known as Elk Lake, *General Laws of the State of Minnesota* 26 (1889), 182. On Glazier, see Brower, "Mississippi River"; Willard W. Glazier, *Down the Great River: Embracing an Account of the Discovery of the True Source of the Mississippi* (Philadelphia: Hubbard, 1889); Severin, *Explorers*.
48. Braun, "Producing Vertical Territory," 15.
49. Brower, "Mississippi River," 297.
50. *Ibid.*, 300, emphasis added.
51. E. Levasseur, "The Question of the Sources of the Mississippi River," *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Harrison & Smith, state printers, 1898), 225.
52. See also "The Monthly Record," *The Geographical Journal* 6.3 (1895): 285–86.
53. Brower, "Mississippi River," 108–10.
54. *Ibid.*, 245.
55. *Ibid.*, 300.
56. *Ibid.*, 297.
57. I want to be clear that I am not arguing that Brower was doing "bad" science and that he should have used different methods or techniques to determine the source of the river. Such an argument would constitute what David Demeritt calls "social construction-as-refutation," which is essentially calling attention to the politically motivated shaping of knowledge by showing how it is wrong, flawed, etc. See David Demeritt, "Being Constructive about Nature," in *Social Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics*, ed. Noel Castree and Bruce Braun, 22–39 (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001).
58. Jacob V. Brower, "Prehistoric Man at the Headwaters of the Mississippi River," *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Harrison & Smith, state printers, 1898).
59. The Mound Builder theory was promulgated by Benjamin Barton Smith in the late eighteenth century and made its way into the popular imagination. By the 1830s, for example, William Cullen Bryant had incorporated it into his well-known poem "The Prairies" (1832). See Benjamin Barton Smith, "Observations and Conjectures Concerning Certain Articles Which Were Taken out of an Ancient Tumulus, or Grave," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 4 (1799): 181–215. On Bryant, see Ralph N. Miller, "Nationalism in Bryant's 'The Prairies,'" *American Literature* 21.2 (1949): 227–32.
60. Cyrus Thomas, "Burial Mounds of the Northern Sections of the United States," *Fifth annual report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1883–84* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1887): 3–119.
61. Brower, "Prehistoric Man," 241.
62. *Ibid.*, 263.
63. *Ibid.*, 245.

64. For more on this, see Wainwright and Robertson, "Territorialization"; on Brower's life, see Jacob V. Brower, "Autobiographic Sketch," 1902, available at Rare Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University.
65. "Charting Lake Itasca," *Discovering Itasca* 4, n.d., Natural Resources Department, Parks and Recreation Division, State Parks files, Itasca State Park, location: 111.G.5.5B.
66. Wainwright and Robertson, "Territorialization," 201.
67. Johnson, *Ireland*, 2–3.
68. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.
69. Graham Smith, "Nation," in *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, ed. R. J. Johnson, Derek Gregory and David M. Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), 404, emphasis in original.
70. Willems-Braun, "Buried Epistemologies."